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ABSTRACT

The skills that are called on for dissertation and dissertation work are somewhat different from those that are used for regular course requirements. Whereas academic courses have clear beginnings and endings, the dissertation project is a somewhat open-ended task and the dissertation process is relatively unstructured. Success in completing the dissertation thus requires a grasp of the unique nature of the dissertation requirement. This qualitative study focused on clinical psychology student perceptions of factors helping and hindering dissertation progress. (Author)

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Student Perceptions of Factors Helping and Hindering Dissertation Progress

by
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Student Perceptions of Factors
Helping and Hindering Dissertation Progress
Maryka Biaggio
Poster presented at American Psychological Association, August 2002, Chicago

The skills that are called on for dissertation and dissertation work are somewhat different from those that are used for regular course requirements. Whereas academic courses have clear beginnings and endings, the dissertation project is a somewhat open-ended task and the dissertation process is relatively unstructured. Success in completing the dissertation thus requires a grasp of the unique nature of the dissertation requirement. This qualitative study focused on student perceptions of factors helping and hindering dissertation progress.

There is little qualitative research examining students' experiences with the dissertation. Morton and Worthley (1995) assessed responses to open-ended questions about the dissertation process. The most positive aspects for students were: 1) the writing and thinking process; 2) collaboration with faculty; 3) conducting an independent research project; and 4) completing the project. On the other hand, negative aspects included: 1) problems within the dissertation committee; 2) the unwieldy administrative bureaucracy and complexity of the process; 3) the time-consuming nature of the research process; and 4) the fact that the process became more complex than necessary.

Method

In the present study 62 graduates of a clinical psychology program at an independent university were asked to respond to 16 open-ended questions addressing

factors previously identified as having some impact on dissertation progress: program support; faculty committee; social support and social/personal circumstances; feelings about the project and sense of self-efficacy; and logistical factors. Sixteen graduates responded. Responses under each factor were coded as to whether they were positive, mixed, negative, or null with respect to their impact on progress.

Results

Item 1: Did classes offered or not offered in program help or hinder?
Comments fairly balanced between positive and null/negative. Graduates generally did not consider this a make or break variable.
Classes which were viewed as helpful were primarily research methods, though classes in dissertation topic area were also mentioned.
Negative sentiments focused mostly on lack of courses in dissertation content area or in qualitative research.

Item 2: Did University or program standards or requirements help or hinder?
Most comments are negative, though some are null, and a few positive.
Negative comments are quite varied, with no single theme emerging.
Requirements and structure are viewed by most graduates as impediments.

Item 3: Do you have comments on any other program support factors?
Most comments negative, but many positive to null also.
Negative comments focus mostly on inadequate mentoring and insufficient support or structure.
Positive comments all focus on support/help offered by committee and staff.

Item 4: What role did faculty support or lack thereof play in process?
Comments mostly positive, with a some mixed/negative.
Graduates generally feel their chair/committee was very helpful, although some express mixed sentiments about timing/nature of support.

Item 5: How accessible was your faculty committee and was this important in process?
Comments largely positive, only a few mixed to null/negative.
Graduates mostly report that committee was quite accessible.
A few report such problems as committee chair leaving university or difficulty getting feedback during faculty vacations or via long distance.

Item 6:How often did you communicate with your committee, & did amount of communication help or hinder?
Comments balanced between positive and null.

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Graduates generally indicate adequate amounts of communication and many indicate that amount of contact varied during the process.

Item 7: What was quality of communication with committee, and what role did that play for you?
Comments mostly positive, with some mixed.
Graduates experienced their communication as very supportive and facilitative, though some noted frustration or lack of active mentoring.

Item 8: Comment on whether relationships with family played any role in facilitating or hindering progress.
Comments are balanced among positive, mixed, and negative.
Many graduates found family members to be highly supportive. One thought it was silly to even ask about this! Some reported that family both provided support but also hindered progress, mostly because of family obligations. For some graduates family problems (e.g., illness or marital problems) or obligations (e.g,. care of a child) hindered their progress.

Item 9: Comment on whether relationships with peers or other students played any role in facilitating or hindering progress.
Comments are largely positive, and this seemed to be a very important factor for many graduates.
The majority of graduates viewed other students as very helpful, providing inspiration, emotional support, validation, and a place to kvetch.
For a few graduates peers played no role; for one of these family responsibilities did not allow time to connect with peers.

Item 10: Did any personal circumstances play a role in helping or hindering?
Negative comments predominate here.
Several circumstances hindered progress, including outside employment, internship demands, and family crises.
One graduate noted that NOT having to work helped, and another noted that having a personal timeline facilitated completion.

Item 11: What was your attitude toward your project, and how did this help or hinder?
Most comments were positive, with some mixed and few negative.
Interest in, passion about, or sense that one's topic was important were all attitudes that facilitated progress.
Those who expressed mixed sentiments also experienced frustration, especially as the process dragged out over time.
Those who expressed negative attitudes felt overwhelmed or hated the process.

Item 12: What was your attitude about your ability to complete, and did this play any role?
Comments are balanced between positive and mixed/negative.

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The knowledge that one could complete the project was important for many graduates.
Some were sure of their ability but experienced doubts or difficulties along the way.
A few were hindered by negative self-talk or seemingly endless committee requests for corrections.

Item 13: What was the meaning of your dissertation to you, and did this play a role?
Positive comments predominated but there were also many mixed comments.
Many viewed it as a personal accomplishment and/or a learning experience, and this facilitated their work.
Some also experienced it as a hurdle or hoop, and this seemed to detract from the experience for them.

Item 14:Did proximity to campus and your committee or lack thereof help or hinder?
Comments are divided among positive, null, mixed, and negative.
Those who were close by felt that this was helpful.
Several felt that physical proximity was not of consequence (proximity is not clear for most of these respondents.)
Several felt that lack of physical proximity hindered their progress.

Item 15: Did any types of technology used help or hinder?
Comments are mostly positive, with some mixed/null and one negative.
Those who felt that technology helped mentioned e-mail, phone, fax, laptop computer, and SPSS software.
For some technology was of no consequence, and a few expressed problems with particular types of technology.

Item 16: Comment on any additional factors that you believe were important.
Ten graduates commented here. Positive comments focused on helpfulness of faculty/committee, learning to accept responsibility for the process, and a book on surviving the dissertation.
Negative comments mentioned lengthiness of process, lack of understanding of process, not knowing how to use SPSS, and family/home demands.

Overall impressions from review of responses to all questions.
Graduates identified support from peers as a highly important factor, and many also were pleased with support from committee.
When problems were identified they revolved around frustrations with lengthiness of process and logistical problems.
The program was generally viewed as facilitative, especially with respect to faculty and staff support.
Some graduates had complaints about lack of relevant courses, difficult program demands, and less than optimal committee support/communication.
Many graduates identified family members as sources of support, though some noted that family obligations distracted them along the way.

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For some graduates life circumstances hindered their progress, for instance a partner's illness, a move for internship, or disruption in a relationship.
A sense of efficacy and interest in topic were viewed by many as facilitative of progress.

Discussion

Results were similar to those of previous research and provided illustrative detail about student's perceptions of specific factors contributing to their progress or lack thereof. Key findings indicated that graduates identified support peers as a highly important factor. Many graduates identified family members as sources of support, though some noted that family obligations distracted them along the way. When problems were identified they revolved around frustrations with lengthiness of the process and logistical problems. For some graduates life circumstances hindered their progress. A sense of efficacy and passion for the topic were viewed by many as key to their progress.

This study provided some specific information about student's actual experiences and views about their dissertation work. For instance, program support factors, most notably committee support, were viewed as positive when the committee or program staff were accessible and supportive and negative when there were difficulties obtaining support or guidance. Many graduates felt that having a good working relationship with the committee chair was crucial.

Some graduates were frustrated by the "solo" nature of the project and experienced stress associated with carving out time from other program requirements or personal responsibilities for the dissertation. While the large majority were certain

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that they would eventually finish, some experienced doubts along the way. In the end, however, most reported a sense of accomplishment and pride upon completion.

Many graduates identified outside factors, for instance, employment or family demands, as hindrances. A sizeable number also reiterated the advice that many faculty advisors give: finish the dissertation before going on internship. Graduates also named various other hindrances, including feeling overwhelmed, experiencing the requirement as just another hurdle, working on the dissertation from a distance, and not having a good sense of what a dissertation entails.

This qualitative study was highly informative with respect to student's own experiences and views about what facilitates and hinders their dissertation progress.

Reference

Morton, K.R., & Worthley, J.S. (1995). Psychology graduate program retention, completion and employment outcomes. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 22*, 349-353.

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